"*Pekudei* – Acquiring skills we never dreamed we had"

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The sidrah Pekudei concludes the lengthy account of the construction of the *Mishkan,* the sanctuary in the desert. The Israelites had all generously donated of their gold, silver, copper, and dyed fabrics, for this project. So generous were they that Moses had had to issue a proclamation telling them to stop contributing as they had far more raw materials than they required (36:3-7).

While all of the sidrah's focus is on the materials, much can be learnt by considering the qualifications required of the designer and the builders of the Sanctuary. They are regularly described as being *chochmat lev*, 'wise of heart' (35: 34; 36:1, 2) – rather than 'skilled of hand' – and 'possessed of the spirit of God' (35:31).

The quality of 'wise-heartedness' may be viewed as curious as an essential attribute for an artisan, as may be the fact that there could be found among the Israelites many who possessed the requisite skills to work in metals. After all, they had been slaves in Egypt, working with stone, bricks, and mortar, not with precious metals. The ancient Egyptians built all their pyramids, tombs, temples, and palaces, out of stone, given that it was the most durable of all building materials. It is also unlikely that they had ever been required to measure anything with precision, or to engrave, weave or dye materials.

Although the Israelites may have done the hewing of the stonework and the quarrying and transportation of the limestone, the modern view of Egyptologists and archaeologists is that

the pyramids were constructed by cadres of elite construction workers who worked in teams, serving as a rotating labour force. They were the specialist builders; the Israelites would not have possessed skills in metalwork design while they were in Egypt.

The *Ha'amek Davar* commentary suggests that their "wise heartedness" lay precisely in the fact that most other manual labourers, totally lacking in any particular creative skill, would have run a mile from volunteering for such a task. Yet, among the Israelites there were a sufficient number who were so desperate to participate in that great and sacred project that they "reasoned wisely" – hence the term *chacham lev* - that God would never have issued to them such a challenge and task had it been beyond their ability to perform.

They reasoned wisely that all they had to do was their best, and that, if it was God's desire to see the project implemented, He would assuredly endow them with the requisite skills, creativity, and inspiration. Indeed, this not only applied to the would-be artisans, but also to Betzalel, the Master Craftsman, and his assistant Oholiav. Although they possessed innate artistic skills, the Torah emphasizes the creative 'spirit of God' that descended on them (35:30-31) to enable them to design and make everything with the requisite *kavvanah*, holy concentration.

Boundaries of knowledge would never have been extended, nor basic skills finely honed, if single-minded individuals had not possessed faith, either in themselves, in God, or in both.

Before Roger Bannister had completed the four-minute mile for the first time, people had said that it was totally beyond human ability. Within months of his achievement, several other runners managed that feat. What happened was that, instead of accepting what others had said was or was not possible, they began to believe in themselves, in their own ability to

extend the boundaries of the possible. Indeed, a common denominator applicable to all great innovators, or indeed to anyone who has made a creative contribution in any field, is a relentless belief in themselves and a determination to succeed where others had failed. And that is why records, whether for sailing around the world, climbing the sheerest face of Everest or running around a racetrack, are still being broken. That is why the impossible may become the possible, and the miraculous the mundane.

But the mind alone is never enough. To really achieve, we also require the heart, the passion, the total immersion in the challenge we are undertaking. We need to be *chackmat lev*, 'wise of heart'; we need to be so single-minded that we can shrug off the doubts, the taunts, the derision, sometimes even the dirty tricks of those who prefer the comfort of the *status quo*, and who envy the talents of the pioneers and the dreams of the high-fliers.

God commanded the Israelites to contribute a half shekel for the upkeep of their most creative project, the building and furnishing of the Sanctuary (Ex. 30:13). One of the reasons for the half, rather than a whole, shekel lies at the heart of the message we have expounded. It is to indicate that, although we may think we possess only half the required talent, half the knowledge, half the creative skills and half the required resources, yet we cannot know just how far that measure may be extended by faith. We cannot anticipate just how our half shekel – our small contribution - can join that of others working in an allied field to bring a great project to fulfilment; how one of our insights, however insignificant we may imagine it to be, may provide the missing link essential to bring the most worthy endeavour to fruition.

None of us is a complete shekel, totally self-sufficient. We all need others to help us achieve our dreams and to further God's purpose for us, individually and collectively. If we understand that, then we are endowed with *chochmat lev*, 'wisdom of the heart,' a quality as necessary as wisdom of the mind.

This was first exemplified in the expression of God's purpose in the creation of a partner for Adam: 'It is not good (*tov*) for man to be alone; I will make for him a partner (*eizer*) opposite him (*k'negdo*) for him' (Gen.2:18). The word *tov* in the Creation story connotes that which served God's creative purpose, and which, in turn, was suffused with creative

energy. Hence, after each of the days of Creation, the summation *Vayar Elohim ki tov*, 'And God saw that it was *tov*' is provided. We have here a definition of 'good' and 'evil'. The former is a creative, constructive spirit; the latter, a destructive one.

And it is in that sense that we understand Gen. 2:18. If man was to become a co-partner with God in the development of his world, and nourish the creativity required for its evolution, he would need a partner in that project and a sounding-board for his ideas. Hence, the statement 'it is not *tov*, for man to be alone' means that man will not become *creative* if he is alone, with no one to challenge or refine his ideas. And hence the seemly mutually-contradictory term, *ezer k'negdo*, literally, 'a partner that opposes him.'

The Talmud interprets this, however, as connoting two contrasting situations -

> If man is worthy, she will be his *ezer* – a partner;
> but if he is unworthy, she will be *k'negdo* – his opponent
> (Tal. *Yev*. 63a)

We humbly suggest, however, that it may equally be read, as suggested, as a mutually complementary term, with both words in apposition rather than opposition!! In a loving marriage, to have a partner whose views are respected – and whose criticism is inevitably constructive given the assurance that they have one's best interests at heart – can only serve to help one avoid pitfalls, re-think a rash plan of action, diffuse difficult situations, and clarify ambiguous statements that might lead to misinterpretation, insult, or hurt.

The Midrashic sages firmly believed in the value of a sounding-board, to the extent that they made so bold as to credit God with having an advisory council, called *Pamalia shel ma'alah,* 'the celestial *familia,*' suggestive of His closest confidants, those as close as 'family.' This was inspired by the verse, 'God stands in the divine assembly; among the divine beings He pronounces judgment (Ps. 82:1).

Before creating the world, said those sages, God took their advice on the matter. Unsurprisingly, there were those who counselled against the idea!

Shabbat shalom

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